Chapter 6

Marijke had offered to give me a lift on her bike, but I felt like walking. I wanted to think and I think when I walk. I am what you might call a peripatetic thinker. I agree with Aristotle that movement stimulates the mind and that nature abhors a vacuum. Besides, Amsterdam is a walker's city. It has all the requisites - no cumbersome hills, an absence of heavily motorised roads, few straight lines, many narrow passages that lead nowhere in particular, lots of open windows to peer into, canals with pedestrian bridges and innumerable places to stop if you're thirsty or just want to sit a while and smoke.

It's also a city that never sleeps. It might rest. There are times when it is even rather quiet. But it never sleeps. Something is always happening. You always feel the pulse.

I walked down Princengracht as it arched along toward Liedestraat, back toward my hotel. Not far from Heinke's boat and the organic cafe, on the other side of the canal, was the house of Anne Frank. I stopped for a moment and stood over by the rail along the canal, lit up a smoke and stared over at the simple brick structure on the other side, so quiet and anonymous.

'There are two places in Amsterdam where ordinary people come like pilgrims to a sacred shrine,' Heinke once said. 'The Van Gogh museum and Anne Frank's house. And it's interesting, you know. There's a strange similarity between them. Have you ever thought about it?'

Heinke could find impossible connections between a goat and a shoe if given half a chance. But this one intrigued me. What did he see in common between a 19th century artist who cut off his ear and a young woman hidden from the Nazis who happened to write a journal?

'Think about it,' he said. 'Van Gogh was an artist who never received recognition in his time, who finally went insane and died having sold only two or three canvasses. Anne Frank was a pubescent girl who spent several years in a secret room before being discovered and carted off to a Nazi concentration camp. But how many others were there - failed artists who went mad and young women annihilated by the madness of war?'

This was one of Heinke's many rhetorical questions that had neither an answer nor required one. It was just a semantic lead-in to the mysteries of his convoluted logic where ideas were always ground up and regurgitated in another form - like making a piece of cylindrical dough into a pretzel.

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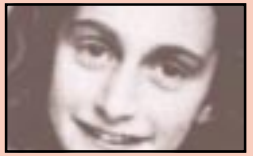

‘Many, I suppose, but what’s the point?’ I asked.

I remember him looking at me deeply with his magnificent penetrating eyes and sighing. Then gazing across at the other side - we were standing at the same place I was standing now - and gesturing at the long queue of tourists waiting patiently to gain entry to that non-descript house, he said, ‘The similarity is that they’ve both become part of the popular culture the same way as rock stars. They both had good agents - in one case a brother, in the other a father - who took the stories and beat the drums and created the myths which the burghers of Amsterdam were quick to exploit.’

I remember shaking my head, both in wonder and disbelief at his uncharacteristic cynicism. ‘Van Gogh was a marvellous artist,’ I said. ‘What he did with colour, no one ever did before.’

‘How do you know?’ he asked, looking at me very seriously. ‘How do you know how many Van Goghs came before? How do you know how many great paintings are lost or destroyed?’

‘It doesn’t matter. His still exist. So maybe we do homage to them, the lost artists, through one who was found.’

‘What a bunch of horse shit,’ he replied. And then looking back at the tourists, he said, ‘I’ll bet that every single one of them has been to the Van Gogh museum, too. It’s on the circuit. And they’ll go home and tell their friends and feel very proud of themselves that they’ve gained a little culture by seeing an original painting hung up on a wall instead of viewing a picture in a book. But if you pulled any of them out of the crowd and sat them down in a room and showed them fifty paintings, without offering them the critical authority saying which of those paintings were ‘good’ and asked them to choose the one they liked and then showed them the one that was worth a hundred million guilders, how would they react? Because there is no relationship between quality and value. And the only way that relationship is sold is by forcing it down people’s throats by setting up false standards and authorities to enforce those standards. It’s a trick to make you believe an innately worthless object is economically valuable.’

‘What does all that have to do with Anne Frank?’ I asked, getting a little fed up with his circuitous rhetoric which was beginning to smack of a tired artist and grapes that were turning sour.

‘Are you a complete idiot?’ he replied, taking out his pipe and stuffing it with some foul smelling tobacco. When he got like that, he was impossible. Heinke really didn’t believe in

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conversations in a civilised form. You either agreed with him or not. If you didn't, you were a fool.

As I stood there, now, looking across at the empty street and the empty house, I recalled the conversation with Heinke that day and wondered again about his crazy response. I could certainly understand how those two icons - and icons they were - Anne Frank and Van Gogh, had special meaning to him. Van Gogh, naturally, as the failed artist who made good in a world he never lived to see nor could have possibly understood. And Anne Frank...

It was the story of Anne Frank that linked us together. For it was the story of my mother - or could have been. And it was the story of his parents. In that way we were brothers, united by historical circumstance.

I never went inside Anne Frank's house. I couldn't stomach it. Neither had he, or so he said. When I was young, I was obsessed by the story knowing that in a very real sense it touched my own life.

My mother had told me that Otto Frank, Anne's father, knew her father - my grandfather. They had lived very near one another in the southern district of Amsterdam before the invasion. If it wasn't for a fortuitous connection in the world of symphonic music, my mother wouldn't have got the visa which allowed her to escape the tragedy which, as Heinke said, happened to thousands of other Amsterdam girls.

So, like many other refugees, my mother suffered from a cancerous guilt. Why did she survive? If there were only fifty visas available, it became a deadly lottery. The document you had in your hand meant another girl had not. It meant you lived and she died.

Anne Frank was one of those who lost. My mother won. She survived, married and had a child. But she never forgot. Anne Frank lived on inside her. And inside me. And, strangely, inside Heinke.

'Why not pay homage to a girl who died in the Holocaust?' I asked that day when Heinke and I stood there gazing across the Princengracht canal at the house. 'Those tourists come from everywhere. At least they think about it.'

'That's the point,' he responded. 'They don't think. They react like they do to a Hollywood film. That house is another theme park for people who want to experience horror safely and then go on with their addled lives. If they thought about it, they'd make some connections...'

'Like what?' I asked.

I never went inside Anne Frank's house. I couldn't stomach it. Neither had he, or so he said. When I was young, I was obsessed by the story knowing that in a very real sense it touched my own life.

‘Like with the Surinamese,’ he said. And then, pointing to the infinite queue that stretched along the pavement as far as we could see, he asked ‘How many of those people actually give a shit?’

I thought about that conversation walking back along Leidstraat to Leidsplein, still bustling in the lateness of the night, and then across Singelgracht, following the path of the No. 2 tram.

And I thought about what Heinke had said again as I passed the new Van Gogh museum rising ominously like a giant bunker in the wreckage of Museumplein.

‘The critics who despised Van Gogh when he was alive aren’t any different from the critics who glorify him now. They are the very same people. You can’t separate the artist from the story. Without the story, a Van Gogh is just some paint on canvas. Without giving his work some extraordinary monetary value, he’s just a mad artist to be mocked. But no one mocks a painting or a painter worth millions. Except he’s dead, which is perhaps the ultimate irony. For in practical, economic terms, his madness now becomes part of the value and because he’s dead it no longer intrudes on the myth. A mad artist alive is a nuisance. A mad artist dead is worth millions to some very sane businessmen.’

Walking down the quiet tree-lined avenue by Vondelpark, I began to realise that these thoughts had emerged once more because they had been playing around in my subconscious - because whenever Heinke spoke about anyone or anything, he was really speaking about himself.

‘An artist doesn’t choose at random. The act of selection is, itself, art - which gives meaning to chaos,’ he had said.

I turned down a small street in the direction of the Concert House and then through a small labyrinth of lanes that led to the hotel.

The chilly mist, reflected in the moonlight and the soft glow from the overhead lamps, gave the air an electric tingle, like a vibrator’s buzz, which sparked my battery even though it was late at night.

Standing outside the small hotel, finishing my cigarette and watching the curls of smoke disappear into the darkness, I became aware of the syncopated rhythms that, at first, I thought were just in my head actually were emanating from inside the building.

I took out the key which Kiko had given me in case I came back late. Opening the front door, I went inside to the reception vestibule. To the left was an opening which led to the breakfast room and a small lounge. The music, a cool and very mellow sound, like the best of 1950’s Chicago jazz, was coming from in there.

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‘The critics who despised Van Gogh when he was alive aren’t any different from the critics who glorify him now. They are the very same people. You can’t separate the artist from the story...’

And then I saw Joop.

Lean almost to the point of being emaciated, wearing a black Van Dyke and a welcoming smile, he held out his hand. 'Hey, man! It's good to see you!'

Joop was a jazz musician who had come back broke from Hungary where he had played for a number a years with one of the top Eastern European combos, touring the remnants of the old Russian empire. Now he worked as night clerk for various small hotels, picking up gigs here and there in the shrinking Amsterdam jazz scene.

We had got to know each other over a bottle one day a year or so ago, when I had come back late, like now, to the music of Ahmad Jamal and Joop, fending off complaints from some of the guests who said they couldn't sleep with all that racket, outraged, shouting, 'Hey, man, that's not noise! That's Ahmad Jamal!' And I came in and said, 'I love that piece. Where the hell did you find the record?' That one instant Joop and I became mates. Later he took me to the flea market by Waterlooplein and introduced me to a black man who sold me five Ahmad Jamal discs for thirty guilders and for that alone, Joop will always be my friend.

The grin on Joop's face didn't disappear. 'Got a surprise for you, man!' And ushering me into the lounge he pointed to a large blob reclining like a tranquillised grizzly bear on the settee.

Chapter 7

Hugo was big, brazen and fat, even for a cop. But there was a gentle side to him which only appeared after the brazenness wore out. 'I thought we were meeting tomorrow,' I said after enduring one of his bear-hug greetings.

We were up in my room. Hugo was pouring two glasses full of brandy from a bottle he had expropriated from Joop.

'I was passing by to leave you a note,' he said, handing me one of the glasses. 'Then your friend downstairs offered me a drink. That was two hours ago...' He grinned and downed half his glass in one enormous gulp.

'Were you able to get copies of the documents?' I asked, hoping to get business out of the way before he was too drunk to remember why he had come.

I knew Hugo from London where he had been sent about ten years back to investigate an enormous diamond theft that involved a group operating out of Amsterdam, London, Johannesburg and New York. I had been assigned to interview him as I was the only one on the paper with a limited knowledge of Dutch and some idiot editor didn't realise that any Netherlands cop sent abroad was bound to speak English better than most Englishmen.

But I showed him the sights of Soho and a pub where he could get a decent glass of gin, for which he was forever grateful. I got a good story out of it and we kept in touch over the years, doing little favours for one another as often happens with journalists and cops. Except I wasn't an ordinary journalist and he wasn't an ordinary policeman.

'There's not much to see.' He shrugged his great hairy shoulders. 'Your friend isn't being very co-operative. It seems he doesn't like to talk.'

It would be interesting, I thought, perversely, to be in a room with Heinke not talking.

'I've only heard what happened from his daughter,' I said. 'What does it say in the report?'

'Daughters are not a very good source if you want to find out about their fathers,' he replied, taking some neatly folded pieces of paper from his jacket pocket. 'Do you read Dutch?' he asked.

'Some. You better read it to me,' I suggested.

He perused the sheets of paper and then rubbed his big, bulbous nose. 'It happened in

I knew Hugo from London where he had been sent about ten years back to investigate an enormous diamond theft that involved a group operating out of Amsterdam, London, Johannesburg and New York. I had been assigned to interview him as I was the only one on the paper with a limited knowledge of Dutch and some idiot editor didn't realise that any Netherlands cop sent abroad was bound to speak English better than most Englishmen.

the Red Light District - in one of those little fucky-fucky rooms there. During the festival. Very noisy that night. No one claims to have heard the shot. But someone called the police. Your friend was found in the room. He was on the bed with the body of a woman...'

'What sort of woman?' I asked.

He licked the tip of his finger and used it to flick through the several pages. 'Cafe au lait complexion. Probably mixed race. Born in Surinam. Age 45...'

'Isn't that pretty old to be on the game?'

'You've been through those streets,' he said. 'It's a full service out there. Whatever you want - old, young, black, white. You want tattoos? Green hair? Chains dangling from a navel? Forty-five isn't that old. I've seen them 55 or 60. I don't know, some of these guys maybe want to fuck their mothers.'

'What's her name?'

'The whore?' He scanned the page quickly. 'Lulu,' he chuckled. 'That's a good one. Her real name was Rachel Desonsa.'

'Where did she live?' I asked, taking out my little notebook.

'In the Bijlmermeer,' he said. 'You want the address?'

I copied it down. 'Have there been any ballistics tests?' I asked.

Hugo had got up from the chair and walked over to the French windows which opened out onto the balcony. 'Nice room,' he said, brushing his meaty hand over the frayed upholstery of the elderly settee stationed by the window, 'but they could do with some new furnishings.' He opened the doors and stepped out onto the balcony to sniff the air. Then turning around toward me, he asked, 'Why do you stay here?'

'I like having miso soup for breakfast,' I said. 'About the gun...'

'That's one of the curious things,' he said, coming back into the room, closing the doors behind him. 'There wasn't any gun.'

'No gun?' I thought perhaps I had lost something in the translation.

He shrugged his heavy shoulders again and made a little puffing sound. 'No gun. At least no gun was found.'

'But she was shot?'

'Yes.'

'It wasn't a very large room was it?'

'Large enough for a bed and a wash basin. You've never been in one?'

He perused the sheets of paper and then rubbed his big, bulbous nose. 'It happened in the Red Light District - in one of those little fucky-fucky rooms there. During the festival. Very noisy that night. No one claims to have heard the shot. But someone called the police...'

‘So where does that leave Heinke?’

‘In prison,’ said Hugo pouring himself another drink. He stopped as the bottle was nearly dry and looked at me questioningly. I shook my head and he let the last drops trickle into his glass.

‘They’ve charged him with murder without a witness or a weapon?’ I asked incredulously.

‘He was found in bed with a dead whore. What would they do in England?’

There was no doubt in my mind what they would have done with him in England, but that wasn’t the point. This, after all, was Amsterdam.

Hugo finished his drink and looked at his watch. ‘It’s late,’ he sighed. ‘I must go.’

‘Thanks for the information,’ I said. ‘Can we meet tomorrow?’

‘It will have to be a late dinner,’ he said, slipping into his great purple coat which he had thrown casually over the chair. ‘I’m working a convention this week...’

‘Businessmen?’ I asked, trying to imagine the big, ungainly Hugo in a room full of silk suits and chanelle.

He chuckled. ‘An international meeting of drug enforcement officers.’

‘Not a good time to be running cocaine in Amsterdam, I guess.’

‘I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘Maybe it is. How about the place we went last time?’

‘The Waag? In Nieuwmarkt?’

‘Nice atmosphere,’ he said, going over to the door and opening it up. ‘Good place to talk. Around nine?’

He stuck out his hirsute paw. I took it and gave it a shake. ‘Right,’ I said. ‘I’ll meet you there around nine o’clock.’

Chapter 8

I was on my second bowl of miso soup of the morning when Kiko came over to my table, interrupting a conversation I was having with a young French woman from Brittany who had come to Amsterdam for a short course in Fhen Shui. She told me I had a phone call.

I took the call in the lounge. It was Marijke.

'I've arranged for you to meet with Van Houten this morning,' she said.

'Heinke's attorney?' I asked, looking back in the direction of the breakfast room. The French woman had finished her meal and was leaving the alcove. She tossed me a Gallic smile and I replied with a little English nod.

'Yes. His office isn't far from your hotel. He has about fifteen minutes this morning before he goes to court. Can you make it?'

'When?'

'In about half an hour. OK?'

'Who did you say I was?' I asked her. 'Friend? Family?'

'I said you were a friend and a journalist.'

'Did he sound pleased or upset?'

'I couldn't tell. Can you meet me later? I want to show you some things I found.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm at home. But I'll be in the Spui. There's a new squat I'm helping with. We could meet over by Athenaeum around noon. OK?'

Van Houten's office was only a five minute walk from the hotel, on Valerius Straat quite near the park. The morning was fresh. The sun had broken through the perennial Amsterdam clouds and the neighbourhood was coming alive as I walked along the tree-lined avenue observing the bustle - stoops being swept, mail delivered, children dropped off, windows cleaned, store front displays organised - and wondering whether I had ever seen the English so good natured and eager to get on with life this early in the morning.

Just next to an *Antik* shop selling African masks, Oriental buddhas, old crockery and coloured beads was a polished brass plaque which read: 'Martin Van Houten, Advokaten.' I tried

Van Houten's office was only a five minute walk from the hotel, on Valerius Straat quite near the park.

ringing the bell and then, deciding it was broken, pushed at the door which easily opened and made my way in.

I walked up a narrow flight of stairs to a brief corridor which led to a little ante-room. Through the opening I saw a middle aged woman standing on an unsteady chair watering a pot of geraniums, red as her hair, which rested precariously on an upper shelf between musty sets of law books. She was so busy at her work she didn't hear me come in.

I looked at her standing on her tip-toes, wobbling back and forth on the chair so that her stockings were slipping down her legs. To get her attention, I cleared my throat. '*Goedemorgen*,' I said.

She turned around in surprise, shifting her balance abruptly. The chair teetered. She grabbed onto a shelf to steady herself, bringing down a shower of books in an enormous crash.

Her eyes opened in amazement, as if unable to comprehend what had just happened. Then, looking dejectedly at the mess below, her body seemed to sag like a wilted flower, her hand drooped and the water pot she was holding emptied its contents onto the scattered books below.

In a flash, the door to the inner office flew open. A tall man with a great mass of curly hair poked his head out. He looked at the woman who appeared very forlorn. He looked down at the mess on the floor. And then he looked at me.

'Mr Dumont?' he said.

I nodded.

He opened the door to his office wider to let me through. 'Won't you come in?'

I looked over at the woman who was still staring down with disbelief at the books scattered on the floor, holding the watering can limply in her hand.

'Come in!' he insisted, making a gesture like a policeman directing traffic away from the site of a terrible accident.

I went inside as ordered. He closed the door and motioned in the direction of a chair facing his desk. I went over to the chair and sat down. He settled himself behind his desk. 'She's new,' he said, in way of explanation.

It was a large office with a pair of enormous windows overlooking the avenue. The walls were covered with works of art, mostly modern and extraordinarily colourful. A few pieces of not bad sculpture were placed, haphazardly, around. A couch against the rear wall was set behind a long glass coffee table over which was strewn several days worth of newspapers and some slick and artsy magazines.

Just next to an *Antik* shop selling African masks, Oriental buddhas, old crockery and coloured beads was a polished brass plaque which read: 'Martin Van Houten, Advokaten.'

Van Houten was wearing a crisp white shirt set off by purple braces. He looked at his watch and then back at me with a pained expression. ‘Marijke telephoned me yesterday and asked if I could see you. I told her I only had about fifteen minutes this morning. So...’ His voice lingered in the air like a lobbed tennis ball. ‘How can I help?’

‘Heinke is an old friend...’ I began.

‘So I understand,’ he cut in. ‘But, really, at this moment there’s not much I can do.’

‘Can I speak with him?’ I asked.

Van Houten shook his head. ‘He doesn’t want to speak with anyone. Not now anyway.’

‘Why?’

‘You tell me,’ Van Houten said.

‘How would you describe his mental state?’

Van Houten thought a moment. Then he said, ‘Calm and determined.’

‘He hasn’t confessed to the murder, has he?’

‘How do you expect me to answer that? I am his lawyer and you are a journalist.’

‘I’m his friend,’ I said.

Suddenly there was a sound from the ante-room like something else smashed. Then a muffled groan. Then quiet again. Van Houten closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

‘How well do you know him?’ I said.

‘Who?’ he asked, opening his eyes and staring at me as if I was from another planet.

‘Heinke. Your client.’

‘Not well. I was his father’s attorney.’

I tried to estimate his age. From his face I would have said he was forty, perhaps forty-five.

‘Not that long,’ he said, as if reading my mind. ‘I helped him settle his estate.’

I didn’t know Heinke’s father very well. I had seen him occasionally as a child and not very often as an adult. He had died about five or six years ago.

‘Are any of those paintings done by Heinke’s dad?’ I asked, looking over at the canvases adhered to the walls. ‘He painted under the name of Vanderzee, I think.’

‘That one,’ he said, pointing to a big yellow abstraction of a dog with huge green eyes and pointy ears set off against an orange background. The style was playful, almost childlike.

‘Do you know about the COBRA school?’ asked Van Houten.

‘Not much,’ I replied, recalling a few mentions by Heinke as well as having seen the posters on his wall.

‘It was a post-war group of surrealists and expressionists who had been part of the resistance in the occupied northern countries. The name is derived from the initials for Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam,’ he said. ‘Their work is gaining popularity again. In fact there’s been a new museum built to display their paintings...’

‘That one south of the city - in Amstelveen?’

‘Yes. Have you been?’

‘No,’ I shook my head, remembering that was one of the places Heinke had demanded I visit last time I had seen him.

‘You should go,’ he said, glancing at his watch again and then standing up. ‘It would make a far better story than the trouble with Heinke minor.’

It was hard making sense of his off-handed manner. Maybe he was in a rush or maybe he didn’t like talking to journalists.

‘Thanks for your time,’ I said, getting up from my chair. ‘Who would you suggest I speak with at the COBRA gallery if I go there?’

He took a pen and scribbled down a name on a piece of note paper. Then, handing it to me, he said, ‘Kirstin Koepel, she’s director of publicity.’

Chapter 9

There's a rule of thumb that if a lawyer suggests you go see someone, there's usually a quid in it for them somewhere. There's also another rule that says if someone is anxious to speak with you, they probably work in publicity.

It was still early in the day when I left Van Houten's office. I had some time to spare before meeting Marijke, so I decided to ring the woman at COBRA.

'You'd like to do a story? Of course, I'd be happy to show you around our museum,' she said. 'Are you travelling by car? No? Well take the No. 5 Tram. It's only about a twenty minute ride from where you are.'

I caught the No. 5 in front of the Steidlijke museum right by my favourite herring stand. In fact, even though it was a bit early, I couldn't resist stopping by for a snack. The herring there is absolutely gorgeous! Fresh and succulent, with a nice silvery sheen and meat just the right shade of red, it's sliced into bite - sized pieces and served up with gherkins and onions on a little paper plate. Besides, it's just as easy to keep an eye out for approaching trams from the kiosk as from the platform in the middle of the road where you'll only get wet and be envious of the others who were smart enough to wait in a warm, dry place with a dish full of fish.

It's a pleasant ride out to Amstelveen on the No. 5 Tram which passes through little neighbourhoods you wouldn't otherwise see - quiet places with lots of green, public housing blocks neatly constructed to take advantage of light and space.

This is *Nieuw Zuid*, the New South which Berlage and his friends in the emerging labour party used as their model for progressive architecture in the first decades of the 20th century. The idea that form and structure of living space, good functional design, had a major influence on social welfare and the betterment of the working classes was first put into practice here.

A little to the east, around Beethovenstraat, is where my grandfather lived when he first came to Amsterdam in the early 1930's. The Frank family lived close by at Merwedplein. Back then the area was thick with writers and artists, refugees from Germany and Austria, bringing with them the richness of *fin de siecle* Vienna and Berlin.

Hardly anything of that period survives here now. It was erased as if someone had deleted a virtual reality program. My mother took me there once, to where the old house had been, and after that she never returned. She couldn't understand how such a vibrant culture had been so

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totally eradicated. Her idea of history then shifted dramatically. For if this culture, so intensely rooted, which existed within her lifetime had vanished without a trace, what did that say about others where there was no one left to tell about it anymore? As for the idea of 'permanence', forget it. Nothing was permanent for her - neither buildings, nor societies, nor people, nor even love.

But the No. 5 Tram, runs to the west of these bitter memories. Which is just as well. Instead, it dodges through a more optimistic view of urban worlds. Until it reaches Amstelveen, a newly sterilised shopping centre utopia, where the tram tracks end and everyone disembarks.

It's not exactly clear what you're supposed to do when you see the tiny sign posted on a pillar next to the tram stop which has an arrow followed by the word, 'Museum.' The fact is that walking in the stated direction means you're swallowed up by one of those agonising malls and all its plastic corporate charm, ground up in some quasi burger cum donut world where every tooth is whiter than white in a vast consumer fantasy that finally shits you out - but where?

I found myself at the anal end in an oozing swamp bordered by piles of toxic building materials. Asking directions, even in Dutch (for finally I had reached the limit of the English-speaking world), merited looks of bemusement. 'A museum? Here?'

Yet I was only a stone's throw from the edifice, blocked from view by all the frantic construction, the scaffolding, the half-finished walls, the cranes and bulldozers, rushing to complete this monstrous whatever which had taken on a life of its own - like a suburban godzilla.

To reach it I had to walk a half mile out of my way, circumventing the vast circus of misconstruction to get someplace that was actually just on the other side of a barbed-wire fence. And quite a journey it was. Mired down in the bog, my shoes sopping wet. Only to be told, later, that if I had gone out the mall by another exit I would have landed dryly in front of the COBRA.

In a zen-like calm it juts up against Mammon. Turn toward the East there's greenery and lakes. But instead of a pagoda, a fortress wall greets you. Can this be it? Heinke had extolled the virtues of this place, the marvellous ambience, he said. And to me, it stands there reminiscent of a great, enormous red brick blockhouse where horses, cows and other large domestics go to ruminate.

But like the new British Library, it's inside you must go to appreciate the brilliance. Similar to a trick box, the outside is a container which tells you nothing about what's in.

It only took a moment after I entered to know exactly what Heinke meant by a living museum which becomes part of the process of viewing rather than providing barren walls to hang dead pictures. There was creative thought that went into this design where space and light

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and form and texture were balanced and promoted through a kind of subliminal architecture. I made a mental note to ask the French woman at the hotel whether this is what Feng Shui was all about.

The woman at the ticket counter seemed surprised and somewhat befuddled when I asked her to call Kirstin Koepel. Looking at me suspiciously, she reached for the phone, mumbled something into the receiver, looked up at me, asked for my name and then, whispering it back into the telephone, finally smiled as if all was OK and she hadn't done something she shouldn't.

I was told to wait in the adjoining cafe which was reached, like most museums struggling for financial support, by trudging through the gift shop and bookstore. I stopped for a moment to page through some oversized artbooks about the COBRA movement which were on display. What struck me, besides the vibrancy of colour and the boldness of form was the child-like playfulness which seemed to stamp their work. It was, in many ways, very contemporary, very modern.

'Most people are drawn here by Constance and Karl Appel but, really, we're much more than that...'

There was a lovely scent of lavender. I looked up from the book and saw a very slim, petite blonde with a pleasant face. She smiled and my immediate thought was that if appearance is publicity then she certainly fit the bill.

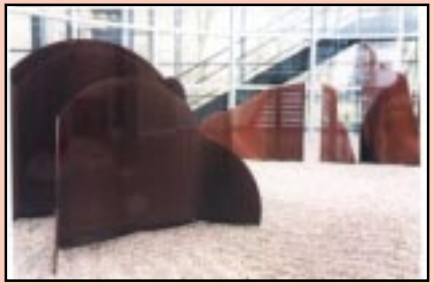
'Kirstin Koepel,' she said, giving me her well-manicured hand which I shook very gently lest it fall off. 'May I show you around?'

She led me into the central room. In the middle was a translucent cylindrical enclosure containing a sculpture garden built on a sea of pebbles. Around the periphery, display panels came out obliquely. Bathed in light, the room took on a glow that transcended the morning gloom. The paintings seemed to come alive on the walls without glare or reflection.

'Mr. Quist, the architect, spent a long time studying the directions of the sun at various times of day at different seasons. The display walls are angled in such a way as to prevent direct exposure. You wouldn't find so much glass in most museums...'

I looked around. The galleries were large and ran freely one into another, but the wonderful feeling of space and openness was truly exploited by the great walls of glass which established a continuity between inside and out.

She led me up an open staircase to the gallery above. 'This is our permanent collection,' she said. 'What most people come to see. Our Jorns, Dotremonts, Noirets, Appels, Constants and Cornelles. But really, we're much more than that. Down below we have some marvellous



But like the new British Library, it's inside you must go to appreciate the brilliance. Similar to a trick box, the outside is a container which tells you nothing about what's in.

exhibitions of new artists - many from Eastern Europe who are rarely displayed but whose work is in the COBRA tradition.'

'Do you have any Vanderzees?' I asked.

She looked at me curiously. 'Why do you ask?'

'I know his son, Heinke,' I explained. Then, studying her expression, I said, 'You seemed surprised that I asked about him.'

She shrugged. 'He's one of the lesser known COBRA artists but several people have been coming in to enquire about him lately.' She pointed to a canvas, very much in the style of the abstract dog I had seen earlier in Van Houten's office. 'We have several but most of his work is in private collections.'

It didn't take long to walk through the rest of the galleries. Heinke was right. Like him, I found the art on display original and refreshing, quite different from the stuff they embalm in the dark, sterile rooms that typify many other museums.

We ended by going back to the little cafe for a coffee and a chat. She presented me with a publicity packet and said, in a most charming manner, 'I hope you send us a copy of what you write. We keep everything on file, you know.'

'It's a wonderful museum, but tell me something,' I said, motioning in the direction of the labrynthian mall, 'Why have they hidden it back here? How can anyone find this place?'

'Space in Amsterdam is not so easy,' she said, making an apologetic face. 'And here, one side at least looks out onto water and green fields.'

I considered the emptiness of the galleries - even though it was mid-morning there was only several people viewing the exhibits - and thought of the endless queues at the Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk. 'But no one's here,' I said.

Smiling sadly, she replied, 'And that's why we need you.'

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Chapter 10

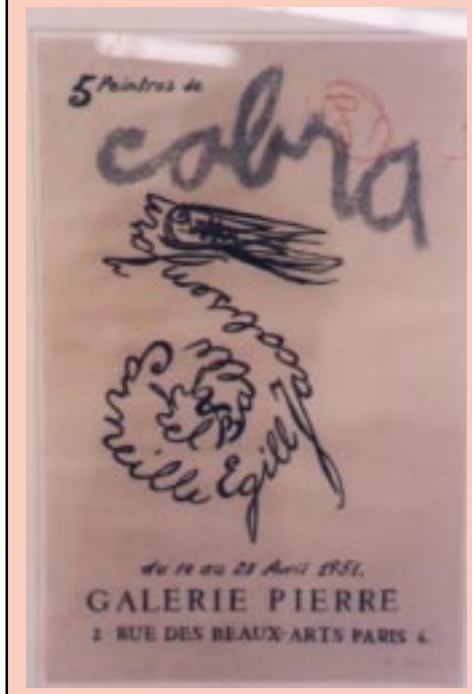
On the way back to the city, I looked through the packet of literature Kirstin had given me and began to make sense of the movement Heinke found so compelling. It was born from war, from the humiliation and isolation of occupation. From the depths of destruction, young artists wanting to build the world anew, breaking with the past, the horrors, the oppression. Going back to the source of human creativity - folk art, children's drawings, the strange, surreal world of the insane. What they had lost was their innocence. Innocence is what they longed to regain.

Yet they wanted so desperately to communicate their rush of ideas, making up for all the terrible time ripped from their lives. Words weren't enough. But neither was the brush. So words and brush were intermeshed. They painted as poets. They painted their words. They painted their dreams. They painted their manifestos. And yet there was more. There was the energy and joy of youth. Of being young. Of having survived the dark years. The holocausts. And more, as Constant wrote, '...there still remains to do for all those who consider art as a weapon of the spirit, as a tool for the construction, the transformation of the world, and the artist as a worker who subordinates all his possibilities, all his activities to the common task, and who does not seek to be great but useful...'

That was in '48. By '51 the COBRA artists had moved on. And in '62 Christian Dotremont, looking back at those years, had painted on canvas, 'COBRA? It's like going on a train journey. You fall asleep, you wake up, you don't know whether you've just passed Copenhagen, Brussels or Amsterdam.'

Three short years and COBRA was gone. It didn't die. It wasn't dead. It had transformed.

Heinke had a photo on the wall underneath the COBRA banner. It was a group of artists, men and women. One of the women was holding a little child whose fist was clenched as he sucked his thumb. The photo was dark, so the faces stood out rather than the figures. What I remember is tousled hair, berets, dangling cigarettes and one balding man at the side playing a recorder. None of the faces were really smiling - no self satisfied grins - but a strong sense



By '51 the COBRA artists had moved on. And in '62 Christian Dotremont, looking back at those years, had painted on canvas, 'COBRA? It's like going on a train journey. You fall asleep, you wake up, you don't know whether you've just passed Copenhagen, Brussels or Amsterdam.'

communality, of people united in something other than just being there. It was the photo of a movement. And, I remember thinking, in that instant the photographer who took it had captured a bit of eternity even though in a few years the people in that photograph would have dispersed and that movement, as a movement, would have ceased to exist.

One face had been circled with a red, felt-tipped pen. It was the face of a man, square-jawed, wearing black horn-rimmed glasses, close-cropped hair, protruding ears, a little older, a little more serious-looking than the rest. I had asked Heinke who it was and he had told me it was the artist Vanderzee, his dad.